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The Honorable Mike Johanns

1400 Independence Avenue, S.W.

Washington, DC 20250-3355

Dear Secretary Johanns:

The American Dietetic Association (ADA) commends the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) for conducting a series of public forums as part of Farm Bill 2007 priority development. ADA has a long history of involvement in food, food assistance, food safety and nutrition programs and our members spoke in person at many of the nutrition forums.

ADA is the largest organization of its kind and it is guided by a philosophy based on sound science and evidence-based practice. ADA members are sought-out participants in domestic and international discussions as they work on nearly every aspect of food, nutrition and health. As such, we are familiar with the importance of the Farm Bill on USDA food and nutrition resources.

The public needs an uncompromising commitment from their government to advance nutrition knowledge and to help people apply that knowledge to maintain and improve their health. Millions of Americans benefit from USDA food assistance programs, but we still see hunger in the United States. Co-existing with hunger is a national epidemic of overweight and obesity. In fact, overweight and obesity is the largest manifestation of malnutrition in the United States today. We also know that American children, who are a key recipient of USDA assistance programs, are overfed but undernourished. Studies show their physical stamina and activity have declined and their health literacy and knowledge is limited.

To address this sad commentary on the nutritional status of Americans, ADA recommends that USDA include four key nutrition goals in their Farm Bill proposal.

USDA's food assistance programs must be available to those in need and adequately funded. USDA's domestic food assistance programs affect the daily lives of millions of people. About 1 in 5 Americans is estimated to participate in at least one food assistance program at some point during the year. The Food Stamp Program is a key component of the Federal food assistance programs, and provides crucial support to needy households. Food stamps reach those most in need. Most food stamp participants are children, with half of all participants under 18.[1] Households with children receive about three-quarters of all food stamp benefits. In addition, many food stamp participants are elderly or disabled.

Improving the nutritional status of Americans needs to rise in priority in food assistance programs, other food programs, and truly, for all Americans. A USDA study found a lack of several key nutrients in American diets, with nearly 93 percent of Americans having deficiencies in vitamin E. Americans also are not getting enough vitamin A, vitamin C or magnesium, according to the study. At the same time, consumers are eating too much of other dietary components. Almost 60 percent of the population consumes more than 10 percent of calories from saturated fat.[2] Approximately 95 percent of adult men and 75 percent of adult women exceed 2,300 mg of sodium per day.[3]

Increased investment in nutrition education and nutrition research is necessary and it must be sustained. If we expect consumers to take

personal responsibility for making healthy choices, then we have a responsibility to make sure that they are adequately prepared. The government must invest in the nutrition research and nutrition education necessary to give Americans the knowledge and ability to make their own nutrition decisions. These nutrition recommendations and programs for the public must be based on sound science. Only the federal government has the public mandate and resources to carry out research on human nutrition needs and to develop dietary guidance that forms the basis for all federal nutrition programs. We believe federal research exploring the relationships between diet (particularly dietary patterns) and health is particularly important.

ADA is an advocate of grading the science behind recommended diets, nutrition guidelines and product label claims, and teaching consumers how to read, analyze and use that information. ADA has its own system of evidence grading that is serving as a model to government regulators and nutrition experts here and around the world. But information is not education.

Labels and pamphlets alone do not lead to behavior change. People have to be taught, and their educational experience needs reinforcement. Nutrition education that works is a worthwhile return on investment. Economic Research Service scientists have studied the connection between nutrition knowledge and food choices with Americans. [4] They have learned that in socio-economically matched individuals, a 1-point improvement on a nutrition knowledge scale correlates to a 7-percent improvement in diet quality. In matched households, an improvement in the primary meal preparer's knowledge translates to a 19-percent improvement in household meal quality. Clearly, nutrition education is one key to nutrition health.

Our experience has shown that registered dietitians are uniquely educated and trained to help people learn and incorporate healthful habits into their lives. ADA works continuously to make it possible for more Americans to have access to dietetic services through private sector and public program coverage.

Having up-to-date knowledge of the nutrition composition of the food supply is essential for all of work in food, nutrition and health to bear fruit. While our farmers continue to grow a wide variety of foods for consumers here and abroad, our knowledge about food composition, the foods that Americans are eating and how overall dietary patterns contribute to health have grown outdated; some data series have lapsed. Our food supply is changing in important ways over time, as are the types of diets that people eat. Farmers and consumers need to understand what those changes mean.

It has been more than a decade since Congress has made a comprehensive review of the nation's nutrition policies and programs. Many of the House Agriculture Committee's newer members have never been briefed on

USDA's role, designated in the 1977 farm bill, as the lead agency for federal human nutrition research. Discussions regarding USDA and nutrition typically focus on food assistance programs, but do not address the key underlying work being conducted by USDA researchers throughout the United States that forms the basis for the Federal nutrition information and education efforts affecting every American.

Clearly, there is significant potential benefit in addressing food, nutrition and health issues now, before circumstances deteriorate, and to ameliorate human as well as economic costs. There will be market needs for healthful products and services that can help the public become more involved with their health and health care management. But there are roles that currently are not being effectively addressed and may rightfully need to be addressed by public policy.

We need USDA to address the now out-of-date perception that a safe, affordable, varied supply of food necessarily leads to a well-nourished, healthy population. It is time to shift to a new paradigm that is founded on people being able and willing to choose healthy diets for themselves and their families.

Sincerely,

M. Stephanie Patrick

Vice President

Policy Initiatives and Advocacy

[1] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition and Evaluation. Characteristics of Food Stamps Households: Fiscal Year 2004, FSP-05-CHAR, by Anni Poikolainen. Project Officer, Kate Fink. Alexandria, VA; 2005.

[2] Briefel RR, Johnson CL. Secular trends in dietary intake in the United States. *Annu Rev Nutr.* 2004;24:401-431.

[3] Institute of Medicine. Dietary Reference Intakes for Water, Potassium, Sodium, Chloride, and Sulfate. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press; 2004.

[4] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service and Center for Nutrition Policy and Promotion. USDA's Healthy Eating Index and Nutrition Information. Technical Bulletin No. 1866, by Jayachandran N. Variyam, James Blaylock, David Smallwood, Peter Basiotis. Alexandria, VA; 1998.